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SACRED JOURNEY

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ JUNE/JULY 2005

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THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is

to encourage and support

a spiritual orientation to life,

to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit of unity

among humankind.

C O N T E N T S

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Cover photo by Louise Hutner: New England stone wall, Middlebury, VT

Become Holy



"You gather everything, without hatred, jealousy, or rivalry. The light of peace and a fierce boldness manifest in you. The splendor of compassion, and the glory of love shine through you. The desire to act and work, the passion to create and restore yourself, the yearning for silence and for the inner shout of joy—these all band together in your spirit, and you become holy." ~ Rav Abraham Isaac Kook

Recently I had the honor of seeing "the light of peace. . . the splendor of compassion and the glory of love shine through" a dear friend on my daily visit to her in the hospital where she was recovering from a burst appendix. As I came through the door on this particular morning, something felt different. The machines, with their hums and clicks, seemed quieter—respectfully quiet. I rose to tiptoes and slid into the room. She lay in her bed transformed—a smile of peace where so much pain and fatigue had held forth all week. I wish I could say I saw a glow surrounding her. I know I felt it—a warmth of serenity and holiness that enveloped me, inviting me into a sacred place with her.

She had been praying, meditating, and reading sacred writings during a rare two hours of uninterrupted quiet. It was rare not only because of the seemingly constant

stream of professionals and visitors who shower continual doses of care upon the patient; it was rare because she is one who is so busy “doing” for others that she often forgets how to “be.” This, we realized in the peace of the moment, was the gift of her short hospital stay—a forced letting go of all the daily “doings” so that now, by just “being,” she was open and available to herself and to God. She was fully present. In this state of no resistance, of attunement to the spirituality and holiness of life in the moment, she received God’s gift of joy and light.

We talked about how hard it was likely to be to stay in this place of love and light when she got home. And it was, and is. The threads of daily life become like nooses threatening to tighten and choke us back into submission to mundane tasks. Our challenge is to loosen our grip on the threads and open to the beauty and joy that lie at the heart of every moment of life.

Joy, love, and light await us at the core of every major faith tradition. In this issue you’ll read about the Jewish practice of mindful blessing, the Buddhist practice of mindfulness meditation, and the Christian prayerful Way of Light. Each practice is a way of connecting to the endless joy and love flowing through Creation. Our three original stories, as well as our poems and prayers, also reflect this theme of opening to the Divine with trust and faith—and experiencing the resulting peace of the Spirit within.

Every day we have a new opportunity to open to the Divine flow of love and joy, if only we would use it. If we could be mindfully present and grateful with every breath we take, we could work miracles.

Note: We share with you the sad news of our friend Gerald May’s death on April 8. Please see his story in our April/May issue, and watch for more in an upcoming issue and on our web site. We honor the gift of his life in ours.

OUR FEATURE

The Path of Blessing

Marcia Prager



Rabbi Marcia Prager is a vibrant Reconstructionist / Jewish Renewal teacher, artist, storyteller, and therapist. A graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, she serves as rabbi for the Philadelphia and Princeton P'nai Or Communities. She is on the faculty of the Jewish Renewal Life Center, and she teaches widely in many different Jewish and interfaith settings, offering the wisdom of Jewish tradition as a path of personal growth and world healing.

We offer here a sampling of Rabbi Prager's words on the Jewish mindfulness practice of blessing, from her book, The Path of Blessing: Experiencing the Energy and Abundance of the Divine. In this book she explores the profound spiritual wisdom that lies in the Jewish practice of blessing, a short, deeply meditative exercise that promotes joy and appreciation, wonder and thankfulness, amazement and praise. Each word in a Jewish blessing becomes an invitation to discover the presence of God flowing through even the smallest actions of our lives.

As Prager says in her Preface: "as I steeped myself more and more deeply in the practice of Hebrew prayer, it

became clear that a vocabulary as small as a hundred words . . . would open up a vast panorama of Jewish spiritual wisdom. . . But how to begin? Where should I start the hundred words? The answer was obvious. I should begin with the words of a blessing. Blessing is the foundation of Jewish prayer. . . I began to explore the depths of meaning that lay in each of the six opening words of a Hebrew blessing."

A simple Hebrew blessing is a powerful thing—a one-minute, deeply meditative exercise exploring the nature of the Creative Force we call God and the dynamic relationship between God, human consciousness, and the unfolding universe. Far from a mindless mumble, each word of a Hebrew blessing is crafted to touch deep centers of awareness and receptivity within us. Each word is a stepping-stone inviting us to explore a rich treasury of images and associations.

Blessing offers us a personal consciousness-raising practice, a spiritual adventure bringing sensitivity and gratitude into the foreground of our lives. While we all have moments when a blessing rises spontaneously to our lips, the path of blessing can become a way of life.

Through the practice of blessing we develop an ever-deepening receptivity to the abundant love and joy flowing through Creation. We learn to accept that love, absorb it into our souls, and offer it back to the source with joy. In this way we come to feel the Presence of God move within us and through us. The result is bliss.

. . . We all have moments in which we are jolted out of our habitual anxiety, when we surrender control and let go of self-conscious judgments. In those moments we can just "be." We can feel refreshingly open, clear, and complete. Our mental clutter and confusions fall away,

and we remember with great joy our oneness with all that is. At such moments the whole universe dances inside us!

In Hebrew this gentle attunement is called *mochin d'gadlut*—literally, “big mind,” expanded consciousness—moments in which our hearts open to awe, wonder, and infinite possibility. In *mochin d'gadlut*, we are filled with God and every moment is a miracle unfolding.

We strive to hold on to this expansiveness of spirit. But it is difficult, and all too easily we slide back into the more limited spiritual condition of *mochin d'katnut*, “little mind,” constricted consciousness. Accustomed to layers of distress, disappointments, and boredom, we “get by.” We discover that we can avoid being hurt by diminishing our capacity to feel.

As we gradually become numb to both joy and pain, our lives appear manageable. This is the condition described as *galut*, alienation and exile from God. . . . When we allow all the daily miracles to be passed by, our openness to the abundance of divine blessing withers. We realize we have traded away our own aliveness and we long to find our way back. How strongly we need to counteract those dulling life pressures.

. . . any spiritual endeavor not only must act as an antidote to the dulling circumstances of life and keep alive our three-year-old's sense of wonder, it must also actively develop our awareness and sensitivity and nurture a maturation of consciousness.

This is the path of blessing.

The Hebrew word for blessing is *brakha* (plural *brakhot*, or sometimes, more colloquially, *brakhas*). The Jewish practice of blessing derives from our tradition's desire to promote joy and appreciation, wonder and thankfulness, amazement and praise. . . . It merely asks us to engage in a

moment of delayed gratification, using the respite as an opportunity for something else to occur.

. . . in making a *brakha* we separate out time before we consume, use, or enjoy something of the world in order to create a space where something other than thoughtless appropriation can unfold. As we grow in the path of blessing, we open to a more expansive way of being. Through blessing, we uncover the infinitely abundant Presence of God in even the smallest action.

Jewish tradition teaches that the simple action of a *brakha* has a cosmic effect, for a *brakha* causes *shefa*, the “abundant flow” of God’s love and goodness, to pour into the world. . .

. . . Too often we walk uncaring and unconscious through our jobs and lives, oblivious to the love that surrounds us and is us. When, however, we live in the abundant flow, we know ourselves to be loved and supported unconditionally. Only then do we become free both to receive and to give fully.

Each acknowledgement of divine abundance cycles more blessing into the world. Thus all of life is enriched. Jewish consciousness carries a deep awareness that in order for the cycles to continue—whether those of an individual human life, community life, the seasons, or the universe—they need to be nourished. When we fail to cultivate a practice of appreciation as potent as our capacity to appropriate, we become despoilers, destroying both ourselves and the whole. When we use the world as if it belongs to us, we use it as we would a possession. The practice of blessing helps us see that consuming without returning the gift of our conscious awareness makes us in a way like thieves.

A *brakha* completes our energy-exchange with God. We are partners in a sacred cycle of giving and

receiving in which we are not only “on the take.” When we offer our blessings, we raise up sparks of holiness, releasing the God-light housed in our world back to its Source. We receivers become givers, and the nurturing flow is sustained. . .

What does it mean to “bless”?

Blessing implies a transfer of intention, hopefulness, or awareness from a source to a recipient. . .

When we offer “blessing” to the Source of Blessing, we offer our gratitude not only for a particular gift but for the opportunity to experience our connection with the whole of life. Our *brakha* opens us to the *shefa* of divine goodness moving through us, filling us and flowing back to God. We partake of the world and are invited to experience God within everything. . .

When we walk the path of blessing, we begin to recognize the presence of these holy sparks in everything and everyone around us. Day by day the world becomes more alive, more magical, more miraculous! We partake of its gifts and with joy we lift up the holy sparks to fly freely back to God. With each *brakha* we also grow in awareness of our own miraculous soul-spark: God garbed in the essence of our own being. . .

Sending blessing back to the Source of Blessing is far more than just a “thank you card” of gratitude or praise. With our *brakha* we participate in the flow of divinity through the world.

These passages are taken from the “Introduction” and the first chapter, “The Spiritual Practice of Brakhot.” Excerpted with the author’s permission from her book, The Path of Blessing: Experiencing the Energy and Abundance of the Divine, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003, www.jewishlights.com. Please visit her web site at: www.rabbimarciaprager.homestead.com.



Kristina Brendel, "Birch Cathedral," Botanical Gardens, Minsk



Beginning Mindfulness: Learning the Way of Awareness

Andrew Weiss



"To live in mindfulness is an art. It requires our attentiveness and skill, and repays us many times over with lightness, calm, honesty and joy. Because it encourages us to live in the present moment, mindful living allows us to heal our relationships, live more consciously, and move through the world gracefully." ~ Andrew Weiss

When Andrew Weiss began teaching meditation, he discovered that his students responded best when he broke down the process of learning mindfulness practice into distinct and progressive steps. Knowing that most people had little time to devote to meditation, he also made it his priority to teach the direct application of mindfulness, or being fully present in each moment, to daily life. He found that people needed to see everything they did as an opportunity to awaken the meditative inquiry of mindfulness.

Beginning Mindfulness provides us with a basic, workable, ten-week program to help make this simple yet profound practice and way of life our own. We provide here a sampling of excerpts from the book. Weiss skillfully blends the traditions of vipassana, or insight, meditation, and the Hindu yogic tradition with those of his teachers, Korean Zen Master Seung Sanh, and Vietnamese Zen monk

Thich Nhat Hanh. In 1991 Weiss was ordained in Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing. He is a founder of the Community of Interbeing in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the founder and practice coordinator for the Clock Tower Sangha in Maynard, Massachusetts.

(From) INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness meditation was developed by Gautama Siddhartha, whom we call the Buddha, about 2,600 years ago. The Buddha (which means “one who is awake”) offered mindfulness as a practical way to develop our ability to see clearly, to understand ourselves and others better, so that we might live a more joyful and fulfilling life. The Buddha saw how our ideas about things get in our way and realized that the best idea about life is no idea at all. The teachings of the Buddha, in their earliest and original form, are remarkably free of doctrine. While they embrace the same fundamental truths that are present in all the world’s religions, they offer no religious creed for people to believe in. Instead, the Buddha provided a way to use our personal experience to guide us to awakening.

The Buddha is not a god or a being to be worshipped. You do not have to become a Buddhist to practice mindfulness in a nonsectarian context. You can be a Christian, a Jew, Hindu, or an agnostic and still practice the Buddha’s teachings on mindfulness without any conflict. I refer to the Buddha’s teachings throughout this book; in fact, this book would not be possible without them. But I have absorbed those teachings in my experience living as a North American in the late twentieth century from a middle-class family with deep roots in

Judaism. My family's ancestors were Jewish residents of the shtetls of Eastern Europe. Some residents were deeply spiritual, others were not; probably they were all poor. My background is very different from the Buddha's, who was an Indian prince of a royal family and next in succession to his father's throne. Even so, the Buddha's teachings speak directly to me. I find that I can practice them without having to abandon my ancestral spiritual roots, without giving up one iota of who I am. If anything, as I practice mindfulness, my sense of who I am and my connection to my spiritual roots become clearer and clearer. Meditation is not just something you do on a cushion or chair. Anything you do is an occasion to engage yourself mindfully in the present moment. When you engage mindfulness meditation in the present moment, it makes everything you do in your daily life sacred and full of meaning, even washing the dishes or turning on an electric light.

Ultimately, the path of mindfulness will lead you to a place within yourself where you may encounter the world without ideas or preconceptions, where you can disengage from your habitual narrative and free yourself from mental constructs. Here you will see yourself and the world as we all really are, in our great, infinite radiance and tenderness, and in our most awful delusions. Mindfulness allows us to experience the delight of touching life deeply and authentically. It gives us a way through suffering to joy. It encourages us to do all of this every moment in our daily lives.

Faith will be important as you pursue the path of mindfulness. Often you will notice that your practice of mindfulness yields immediate fruits. You will also encounter periods of confusion, when your meditation seems all wrong, or when it seems you are getting nothing out of it.

Your faith in your capacity to be honestly and sincerely open to this moment will guide you along the path of mindfulness to help you wake up. . . Mindfulness meditation, in its pure and classic sense, is about finding your true self. It is about waking up to the true nature of the present moment. As you look deeply into yourself and other beings in the world, you will have the opportunity to free yourself from the concepts that you have about everything, including who you are. As you begin to live this way, being authentically who you are and in direct contact with the world, you will transform the areas of your suffering and make your life more vibrant. . .

Many of us are afraid that if we really allow ourselves to be in the present moment, we will meet some terrible part of ourselves, or encounter a great deal of pain and suffering. That may happen; suffering is part of life. But we may meet joy there as well. Joy and suffering are companions; if we want to know one, we will inevitably get to know the other. . . As you do these practices, please allow yourself the opportunity to experience both joy and suffering. They are essential elements of mindfulness practice, just as they are of daily life.

(From) FIRST WEEK: GETTING STARTED

Mindfulness practice comes in two varieties: formal and informal. The formal practice is what we would normally call “meditation,” for which we set aside a specific time to sit silently with mindful awareness of our breathing, or to walk slowly and silently with mindful awareness of our breath and our walking. The informal practice involves mindfulness of our daily-life

activities, and is just as much “meditation” as the formal practices are. Because the heart of mindfulness practice is the enactment of mindfulness in everything in our lives, both the formal and informal practices of mindfulness are equally important. Each supports the other.

(From) Sitting Meditation

Mindfulness meditation is not about being in a trance, or about escaping from reality. It is about waking up . . . Only when our minds stop racing, only when we allow ourselves to be in one place, can we truly be present in the here and now. This is the first step we take in mindfulness meditation: We use mindfulness of breathing as a way to help us stop and truly be here. As we continue to practice mindfulness meditation, our capacity to stop and be present increases. Out of this we naturally develop deeper concentration and the capacity to look deeply into ourselves or into whatever we encounter.

(From) Informal Practice: Daily Life Mindfulness

The heart of mindfulness practice lies in imbuing each act and each moment with mindful attention. It is essential, therefore, for us to pay as exquisite attention as possible to our every thought and activity from moment to moment. . .

Here are some possible ways to reinforce mindfulness in your daily life. During your first week of practice, please pick one or two and give them your wholehearted attention. You can use conscious breathing —awareness of breath—as a foundation to encourage daily-life mindfulness, just as you use it as the foundation for your sitting and walking meditation practice. . .

When you wake up in the morning, allow yourself some slow, mindful breaths before you get out of bed. See if you can be aware of your breathing and of making the transition from sleeping to waking. Be aware of the sound, the quality of light, or the transition from sleeping to waking. Feel each in-breath calm your body and mind, and each out-breath release any tension or thoughts you're holding. Try smiling and see what happens.

Take a few minutes, either at home or on your way to work, to notice something enjoyable about the morning: perhaps the sunlight or the rain or the face of a child or a flower or the sounds of birds or the wind. See if you can allow yourself and your surroundings to inhabit the same space.

Several times during the day, allow yourself to become aware of your breathing and re-center yourself. Use these occasions to become aware of your body and to let your breath quiet your mind. See if you can allow a smile to bloom.

As you go to bed and prepare for sleep, take some mindful breaths, become aware of the bed supporting you, and allow yourself a smile. Feel the muscles of your body relaxing as you sink into your bed. Try letting go of the past day's activities and of your anticipation of tomorrow. See whether you can end the day with a smile.

Based on the book Beginning Mindfulness © 2004 by Andrew Weiss. Printed with permission of New World Library, Novato, CA. www.newworldlibrary.com or 800-972-6657 ext. 52.

For more information and resources on mindfulness meditation, see Andrew Weiss' web site at www.beginningmindfulness.com, the web site for the Insight Meditation Society at www.dharma.org, and the web site for Thich Nhat Hanh at www.plumvillage.org/.





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Louise Hutner, Lake Dunmore, VT

I L L U M I N A T I O N S



The meaning revealed in the dark night [of the soul] is beyond understanding. . . But one is left with an ever deepening certainty that the meaning is there, that life is much more than coping and adjustment. Mysterious as it may be, there is something wonderful at the heart of our existence, and it is about nothing other than love: love for God, love for one another, love for creation, love for life itself.

~ *Gerald May*

Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every creature is a word of God.

~ *Meister Eckhart*

The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, worry about the future, or anticipate troubles but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly.

~ *Buddha*

Our real journey in life is interior; it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary to respond to that action.

~ *Thomas Merton*

Heaven is a palace with many doors and each may enter in his own way.

~ *Hindu saying*

May your life be like a wildflower, growing freely in the beauty and joy of each day.

~ *Native American proverb*

Be tough in the way a blade of grass is: rooted, willing to lean, and at peace with what is around it.

~ *Natalie Goldberg*

If we are not fully ourselves, truly in the present moment, we miss everything.

~ *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Not only a truer knowledge but a greater power comes to one in the quietude and silence of a mind that, instead of bubbling on the surface, can go to its own depths and listen.

~ *Sri Aurobindo*

Joy is the echo of God's life in us.

~ *Abbot Columba Mormion*

A religious man is a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.

~ *Abraham Joshua Heschel*

Spirit . . . is the point of human transcendence; it is the point where the human is open to the divine, that is, to the infinite and the eternal. It is also the point where human beings communicate. At that point of the Spirit we are all open to one another.

~ *Father Bede Griffiths*



Called to Move

Susan Gregg-Schroeder



I've always been intrigued with the story of Abraham and Sarah, who were called to pack their bags, leave their home and country, and venture into a land unknown. We are often called to move, to make radical changes, either physically, like Abraham and Sarah, or in our personal lives. We are challenged to go in new directions, but it is our choice whether to act on those calls.

We resist change. I'm reminded of Peppermint Patty in one of the Peanuts cartoon strips. Patty is shown with her new carry-on flight bag.

"It's beautiful, Patty," says Lucy. "Are you going somewhere?"

"No," replies Patty. "I hate going places; I just like luggage."

Many of us hate going places, especially when the destination is not clearly spelled out. We lack the faith of Abraham to be sojourners in faith. The opposite of faith is fear. It is fear that holds us back, that allows us to get stuck, that inhibits us from taking risks.

I recall a family vacation when our children were

*Susan Gregg-Schroeder is Coordinator of Mental Health Ministries for the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church and author of *In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression*. Please visit her online at Mental Health Ministries at www.mentalhealthministries.net.*

younger, where parasailing was offered as a water sport. All week we watched persons hanging from colorful parachutes over the water outside our hotel window. Finally, on the last day, we all trooped down to the beach to investigate. Once on the beach, my kids wanted to try, and before I knew it, I was handing over my pesos to the persuasive guide. The kids and I were signed up!

In the spirit of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his first born, I encouraged my daughter to go first. Even after both my children had floated up in the sky and safely returned to the sandy shore, I had second, and third, thoughts. As I was being strapped into the cumbersome harness, I decided this wasn't such a good idea after all; but I realized I was going on this journey, like it or not.

As the guides pretended not to understand my plea for one more Mexican minute, I found myself lurching skyward. As the parachute filled with air, I was effortlessly lifted high above the shimmering waters below. The only sound was the gentle flapping of silk behind me.

I was still tightly clutching the shoulder harness as gradually the fear of the unknown gave way to a sense of being in another world. I cautiously let go of the straps and released the tension in my legs. I was truly hanging in mid-air, trusting in the rush of air that kept the parachute full, trusting in the ropes that held me in place, trusting in the small speck of a boat so far below, and trusting in the guides to catch me as I floated back to the sandy shore.

Floating up there, I thought about faith and trust. I thought about Abraham and Sarah. I would have missed this exhilarating experience if I had not been "encouraged" to overcome my fear and take a risk.

P O E T R Y



Windchimes

*Faint tinkling from the neighbors' place
On a light wind,
A sound like pleasant memories.*

*If we could just speak with one another
In those bright, crystalline words
Over distances.*

*If we could speak at all,
Friendship a grace, like music,
If it could be granted us to speak like
wind song,*

*No more to glower over the barriers—
But to smile, to reach out a hand
Over all our fences.*

Janet McCann

Janet McCann is a professor of English at Texas A & M University. She co-edited two anthologies of Christian poetry. Her most recent poetry collection is Emily's Dress, Pecan Grove, 2004.

Lia Vanderzwart is a 24-year-old childcare provider from Ohio who is planning a move to California to pursue her writing career as a poet and children's author, and to continue walking on the path given to her—in a sunny, warm place.

Purpose

Dance with love echoing inside.
Walk with life and go further
than your dreams anticipated.
Dream so high your soul quakes.
Have faith that with the love you give,
beautiful things
will surround you
and always believe
in your purpose in this incredible life.

Lia Vanderzwart

Reflection

Slow surf, low tide, the sun's disc
travelling in the ripples on the water-skin.
He said: "Be still, stop
the inner talk and keep to
something that shines."
And you knew at once the real silence:
less than a second nothing maybe,
among the crowd of thoughts,
the close, far quietness of the smooth strand
being the naked immediacy you lose and long for
at each heartbeat.

Davide Trame

Davide Trame is an Italian living in Venice, Italy. He is a teacher of English who has been writing poetry exclusively in English since 1993. His poems have been published in countries worldwide, including Ireland, the UK, the US, Canada, and South Africa.

A Poem For Mummy

What was it like, my darling one,

That first, first moment?

That first, tremulous moment of freedom?

Did you look about you and see a whole new world?

Did you watch as you stepped out, and most
finally away, from your human prison?

I'll tell you, my love, what I saw in my heart:

I saw a tremendous unfurling: a flurry and flash
and clatter of wings,

Great white wings,

Strong with purpose and fierce with joy.

And with those wings you launched yourself deep
into the heart of your new world.

Slowly perhaps, at first, you flew through light and cloud.

But then, Oh then! with dawning realization, you
gathered speed, the joy and delirium grew,

And you were careening, leaping and soaring,
unshackled in your brave new world,

And your cry of freedom filled the Angels' ears.

Your wheelchair sits here, my dear.

It sits here, forlorn.

It has no dominion now.

Be in light,

Be in love,

Be with God.

You are always with us.

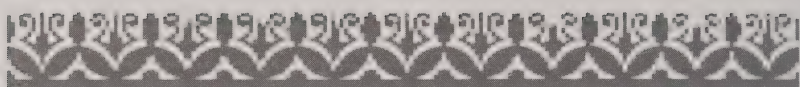
Didi

Didi Sinclair wrote this poem in loving memory of her mother, Dorothy Mansfield Sinclair, 1925-2000. Didi does not consider herself a poet or a writer, and so she believes her mother sent her this poem as a gift while Didi was driving to her mother's house upon learning of her death.

Her mother had lived with multiple sclerosis for forty years, spending much of that time in a wheelchair. Despite her handicap, she raised three children and, after her husband died, she pursued two masters' degrees: first in education, and then in social work. With indefatigable spirit, she refused to let a disease and a wheelchair keep her from living a full life.

During those first hours of loss, this poem brought Didi great joy and comfort as she imagined her mother discovering that she was finally free. She treasures this as a most precious gift of unending comfort and joy.

Didi Sinclair was an actor for twenty years and is now a professional gardener living in western Massachusetts, describing herself as an infinitely happier person now.



Stations of the Light

Mary Ford-Grabowsky



"The Stations of the Light are fourteen joyful, extremely symbolic events that make up the Via Lucis, the Christian Way of Light, a devotion which celebrates the post-resurrection life of Jesus on earth. Whereas the Stations of the Cross, the Via Crucis, chart the course of Jesus' horrendous last hours and death, the

Stations of the Light represent the most joyful time in the Christian calendar, the fifty days of the paschal season, from Easter to Pentecost. . . [They] are immensely important because the Via Lucis is a Spirituality of Joy! . . . It has the power to help Christianity shift permanently out of the depressing life-is-a-valley-of-tears attitude toward Jesus' real teaching that all sorrows end in joy"

~ Mary Ford-Grabowsky

Mary Ford-Grabowsky is a writer, editor, teacher, and scholar. She was the editor of our own SACRED JOURNEY from 1986 to 1996. She received a doctorate in theology and spirituality, and a master of divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary. She has taught at Regis College and served as academic dean of the University of Creation Spirituality. She has published numerous inspirational and academic articles, essays, and book reviews, and edited four books. Currently, she is

working on a book on Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to be published in 2007. She lives with her husband in Boston, Massachusetts.

Ford-Grabowsky shares with us here some passages from her just-published book, Stations of the Light: Renewing the Ancient Christian Practice of the Via Lucis as a Spiritual Tool for Today. This is the first book published in the United States to introduce the fourteen joyful and highly symbolic events that make up the Christian Way of Light. Recognized by the Vatican in its Jubilee Year 2000 Campaign, the "good news" of healing and salvation found in Stations of the Light serves as an important theological balance to the darker themes of the Stations of the Cross. Stations of the Light is a clear and inspiring guide to making this ancient ritual part of the contemporary Christian life.

(From) The Preface

The Christian story has never ceased captivating me from earliest childhood to the present day. I began reading the Christian mystics at the age of eight and spent some of the happiest hours of my childhood at my aunt's big convent on a hilltop in Brighton, Massachusetts, learning all I could about the people in the sacred story and saturating myself in the beauty of silent prayer. In college I minored in theology (no major was offered in those days) and later spent seven rich years in seminary feasting on the endless dimensions of faith, learning, and love that the Christian story has been inspiring for two thousand years. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land and to Rome were on my must-do list by the time I was ten.

When I finally visited Rome for the first time to see the Sistine Chapel, the Pieta, and the other great works of art and architecture that abound in that magnificent city, I had no idea that a trip to the Catacombs would result in a book called *Stations of the Light*, but that is precisely what happened. . .

(From) Chapter One
"The Way of Light"

A New Journey

This book is an invitation to practice a new spiritual journey called the Way of Light, which celebrates fourteen of the most inspiring events in the post-Resurrection life of Christ on earth. These great archetypal moments in the Christian story, which are called the Stations of Light, have been known and cherished since the first century, but as far as we know were never gathered into a precise devotional practice until the present time. Also known as the Via Lucis and Way of Resurrection, this devotion follows the footsteps of the risen Christ and his friends for fifty days, from the dawn of the first Easter Sunday through Pentecost, along a path of transforming joy.

Part I of this book describes the rich origin and significance of the new devotion for Christian spiritual life. Praying the Stations offers gifts of grace that awaken the body, illumine the mind, and train the heart for happiness. Among the gifts are love and faith, which are the purpose of all prayer, as well as peace and comfort, reverence for the sacred, and joyful optimism about the future and growing toward elderhood. Part I also contains a chapter on the Way of the Cross to show

how its focus on a single tragic day of Jesus' life is like telling only the first part of a story and leaving out the happy ending. The Way of Light takes up the story with the Resurrection and celebrates the awe-inspiring events that occurred from then on.

Part II, the devotional section of the book, contains spiritual practices for praying the Stations of the Light. The practices for each station are designed and arranged for maximum soul-building, community-building, and loving intimacy with God. They involve the whole person—body, mind, and spirit.

Where Has the Way of Light Been?

. . . The Via Lucis formally became a Roman Catholic devotion at the end of the twentieth century when the Vatican was preparing the Jubilee Year 2000 campaign and searching for new devotions appropriate to the millennial transition and yet faithful to the Christian tradition. . .

Long before that, the Second Vatican council (1962-65) had generated widespread awareness, especially among the laity, of a perplexing negative cast to the church's preaching and teaching through an overemphasis on suffering, evil, sin, and guilt. Vatican II attempted with some success to bring the negative and the positive into a better balance, one that painted a more accurate portrait of the real relationship between sorrow and joy in the Gospels and in life . . .

Awareness grew that a Via Crucis without a Via Lucis was like a bird with only one wing, utterly incapable of flying. Significant strides have been made in bringing the positive and negative into a right relationship since Vatican II and, hopefully, as the Way

of Light spreads around the world, it will contribute significantly to an attitude of Christian joy. We are called to be crucifers and lucifers, cross-bearers and light-bearers.

(From) Chapter Three
“Gifts of the Way of Light”

The essence of five of the fifteen gifts is presented here.

A JOYFUL SPIRITUALITY

. . . Each of us has a small seed of the divine embedded at the center of our bodies that needs only a little tending to open and grow into something beautiful. And amazingly, the sacred process never ends. It is as though the original divine seed was always there, opening and reopening, giving birth over and over as long as we live. All we are asked to do is trust the interplay of darkness and light and give the seed a little help by keeping the soil moist and saying “yes” to the grace of the moment.

The Way of Light is a spirituality of joy because praying the stations leads to growth and amazing surprises. Even when we use the practices to get through a difficult time, they release a lightheartedness and gladness to be alive from a space in the soul that is deeper than feelings, thoughts, and images. Each exercise seeks to be exhilarating by reinforcing the clear New Testament teaching that spiritual life is an invitation to maximize joy despite deep pain. . .

Joy evolves through the fourteen Stations of the Light like a contagion, passing from person to person, growing in strength and intensity, unveiling divine purposes, motivating the community to persevere in

the life of prayer. Part of the teaching of the Way of Light is that joy is so integral to Christian spirituality that it belongs close to the “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and love.

CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING

The Way of Light offers opportunities for both introverted spiritual practice and extroverted creativity, which together form the basis of contemplative living, meaning awareness or mindfulness in the moment. . . . When we first decide to undertake a more contemplative lifestyle and sit down to meditate silently, most of us find our inner stream of thoughts jumping from association to association wildly, unfocused and directionless. For this reason, Eastern religions compare the human thought-stream to monkeys swinging from branch to branch in the jungle and call the untrained mind the “monkey mind.” Calming the mind is a first goal of meditation and of the Way of Light . . .

Pure silence may seem inaccessible, like the space between breaths or between the notes in a song, yet we eventually do receive experiences of it, which have powerful effects. When we sit down to our spiritual practice session stressed by the chaos all around us, feeling fragile, or confused about who we are and what we are supposed to be doing, only a few minutes of quiet can restore the peace and happiness of contemplative life.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

. . . The Way of Light is from beginning to end a path of mystical experience. A dead man comes back to life: angels manifest; people have visions; flames set

spirits on fire; there is continual contact with God through the risen Christ; the Holy Spirit is seen to descend on humans in flames; and the highest form of love, mystical love, is released in men's and women's hearts. Three words that the New Testament uses interchangeably for "God," which all happen to begin with the letter L, are explicit or implicit at every station: love, life, and light. Christian, Hindu, Sufi, and other religions' mystical writings contain a storehouse of experiences where all three come together . . .

HELPING THE EGO LET GO

Learning to let go, which is one of the primary reasons for undertaking a spiritual practice (if not "the" essential reason), is the key to being a whole person, the free self we already are but may be keeping hidden. It is like removing a tight belt at the end of a long day and feeling that we can breathe again. The body relaxes and normal spaciousness pours back into our soul from the cramped hiding places inside ourselves where we keep it compressed.

Spirituality works by enabling us to take a step back from the ego's narrow vantage point to look at things from a broader perspective. When our viewpoint opens, we see other people's attitudes more clearly and see issues in a brighter light. Problems, conflicts, and suppressed cargo from our past lose intensity and feel lighter when looked at from the wider vantage point. The decisions we make from here are more free. Greater wisdom informs our choices. When the ego is not dominating the psyche, it is the nature of the self to love, to relate without judging or being critical of ourselves or others, to stop comparing other people's

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“outsides” to our “insides.” Many issues healed in psychotherapy resolve themselves through spiritual practice in less time and without cost.

A VISION OF THE BEST

. . . One of the first benefits of spirituality is recognizing God’s initiative in our lives. God is constantly reaching out to us through apparently ordinary events and the people who come and go in our lives on an average day. Spiritual vision sees that plain daily occurrences are revelatory of the divine and can be woven into our destiny like golden threads. Everything has a reason and destination. Nothing happens by chance. Spiritual practice changes us, and part of the transformation is a vision of life at its brightest and most beautiful.

(From) Chapter Four “How to Practice the Way of Light”

Spiritual practice accomplishes what nothing else in life can, the miracle of awakening to a new vision of yourself and imagining a new way of being in the world. From this broader and happier perspective, you may be surprised to find how wide your heart can open, how tenderly you can express yourself, and how deeply caring you can be when responding to the needs and hurts of others. But this is precisely what can happen when you practice the Way of Light.

Excerpted with the author’s permission from her book, Stations of the Light: Renewing the Ancient Christian Practice of the Via Lucis as a Spiritual Tool for Today, Image Books, Doubleday, 2005, www.randomhouse.com/doubleday.

P R A Y E R S



Let Me Be

Today
grant me the ability to help myself
and to help others.
Let me be a light
for those who move in darkness.
Let me be a source of healing
for those who hurt.
Let me show the way
to those who are lost.
Let me forgive
those who are unforgiving.
For it is only through these actions
that I will find my own peace,
my own light,
my own intended journey
of recovery.

Corrine De Winter

Corrine De Winter is the author of seven collections of verse. Her work has appeared in hundreds of journals and books including Comfort Prayers; Bless the Day; and The Language of Prayer. She lives in Western Massachusetts.

Laurie A. Jacobs is an emerging poetic voice originally from the Kansas City, MO area. She has also published essays and is working on her first novel.

Lia Vanderzwart has another poem, as well as her bio, on page 22 of this issue.

Lift Me Up

Lift me up
to the skies of truth
where answers
abound and fall
hopefully upon the
hopeless . . . bring my spirit
to the open meadows,
where thought runs free
among the daffodils
and I, in perfect silence,
plead to rejoice with you.

Laurie A. Jacobs

Fairytale Dreams

You painted the sky like a
field full of lilies, swimming in
waves full of fairytale dreams.
You stretched the sunlight
to the ends of the world and warmed
the very bottom of my soul.
Thank You for reminding me
of moments like these, when so
many times I forget that
You are always by my side.

Lia Vanderzwart



Paths To God

Mary Chandler



Churches lined the streets of the small town where I grew up. My friends and their families belonged to a wide variety of religions so I visited many holy sanctuaries.

For two summers, when I was nine and ten years old, I attended the Christian Missionary Alliance Bible School. That first day, a kind woman gave each of us a walnut, painted gold. I thought it was beautiful. Inside, I found a Biblical verse that read: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matt. 6:21) And then Mrs. Whitney told us what the verse meant. Through her flannel-board stories, I learned about the Old Testament prophets and about the stories of Jesus.

At the Catholic and the Greek Orthodox churches, I learned about ritualistic worship. Hearing services in Latin and Greek fascinated me. The Methodists and Seventh-Day Adventists brought other dimensions to my religious life, as did the Salvationists in a nearby town. I felt at home among these congregations, even though they worshipped differently than I did. I was drawn to their sincerity and devotion.

Mary Chandler's work has been widely published in national magazines, newspapers, literary journals, and on the Internet. She is a retired teacher who loves opera, travel, visiting friends and family, and a good read. She lives in Rancho Santa Fe, CA.

I especially loved the music. I remember a young boy in a white robe singing “O Holy Night” with violin accompaniment by his father. The young harpist at another church looked like an angel as her fingers plucked the strings. Singing hymns with a congregation made me feel as though I were in a heavenly choir. Sometimes the full, rich tones of the pipe organ filled the church as we lifted our voices to God. We also sang with piano accompaniment, or with no accompaniment at all. I discovered that many of the hymnals used in various churches contained some of the same songs, even though the words or the music might vary.

One weekend, when I was twelve, a tent revival came to town. Not wanting to miss out, two of my brothers and I attended the service. The evangelist led the participants in a frenzied call to repentance. People received the spirit, cried out, wept, and were “born again.” Not accustomed to such a public display of emotion, I felt uncomfortable, out of place.

“Dad,” I asked my father that night, “why are there so many churches and why do they all worship a different way? And why do most of them think their way is the only way?”

Dad smiled. “Religion is complex,” he said. “Some folks worship the way they do because it’s what they’ve been taught from childhood. Others, like the folks you saw tonight, I suspect, experience a spiritual conversion and give up their old way of life for a better way.” He reached for our worn family Bible. “Remember, dear,” he said, “God’s children come to Him by different paths. What’s important is that they follow His word so they don’t lose their direction during their journey.”

After I left home, I sat in many houses of worship.

When I heard President Kennedy had been shot, I sought solace at St. Mary's—a quiet place where I could talk to God. Following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., mine was one of a few white faces in an all-black congregation at the First Baptist Church. Tears streamed down my cheeks as we joined hands and sang “We Shall Overcome.” During the Vietnam War, I studied the beliefs of the Quakers, the Mennonites, and the Amish for a better solution to world peace. The Christian Scientists helped heal my aching heart in Chicago when my best friend's baby died during childbirth. I walked different paths. All led to God.

For fifteen years, I taught English in a public high school. My “Bible As Literature” class always filled up first. My students understood that this was not a class in religion. They wanted to know more about the Biblical characters and teachings that kept cropping up through the ages in fiction, plays, poetry, essays, political speeches, and even secular music.

“Whatever religion you choose, if any,” I told each new class, “remember that in times of trial, we all revert to those beliefs that are familiar to bring us comfort. A person's faith is deeply felt and profoundly personal. Take care that you do not destroy that faith.”

I loved those kids! They reaffirmed my belief that kids care, that they seek spiritual truth, and that no church has a monopoly on that truth. Whatever their religion, they lived, as best they could, the principles they had learned. And they were always open to “a better way.”

I have worshipped God through music in the Church in the Rock in Helsinki, Finland. I felt His presence among the pilgrims from Spain during a

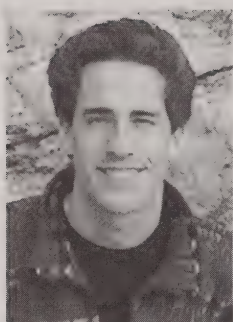
moving service in the chapel at the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi. God was with me in a tiny church in Costa Rica and in regal cathedrals throughout Europe. His teachings flourished in the lives of the poorest of the poor, whom I visited in the shantytowns of Pretoria, South Africa. Walking through Auschwitz, I thought about all those who were taken on a path they had not chosen. I felt their commitment to their faith and to God—and I wept. In St. Petersburg, I watched elderly Russian women, bundled in coats and scarves, and wearing sturdy, worn shoes, prostrate themselves in prayer. In Bergen, Norway, I listened to a moving Night Concert.

Wherever I travel, houses of worship abound. Within each one I have felt God's presence and rejoiced in God's word. My father was right. God's children *do* come to God by different paths—and at different times in their lives. Each time I visit another place of worship in another faith tradition, I am reminded yet again that it isn't the path but the spiritual *journey* that really matters.



Up For Healing

Dan Joseph



Years ago, when I began a formal spiritual practice, I was delighted. I felt like a young man who had just joined a gym. “Soon,” I thought, “I’ll be fit and strong! I’ll just try a few of these practices, and I’ll be filled with clarity, peace, and a sense of purpose. What fun!”

Unfortunately, that’s not how things worked out. To my chagrin—even horror—I found that the more I did my “spiritual work,” the messier my life got. I wasn’t becoming less fearful as I went along—I was becoming more fearful. My feelings of low self-esteem weren’t going away; they were becoming increasingly uncomfortable. I was baffled. What was going on?

It took me a long time to understand that this is a normal part of the process. When we signify our willingness to work with God, our inner blocks often “rise up” to be released. This was news to me. I thought that living the spiritual life would be a quick, clean fix to my problems. Instead, I found that the process is like clearing a blocked pipe. The water will flow, but first there may be some goop to locate and remove.

I share this because I want to support people who

Dan Joseph is the author of Inner Healing and Inspired by Miracles. Please visit him online at www.DanJoseph.com.

are finding that fears, guilt, and other unloving thoughts are coming into awareness as they do their spiritual work. This can be a disconcerting experience. Inner healing isn't always pretty, or even comfortable. But as these blocks rise up into our awareness, we're given the opportunity to release them to the Inner Transformer, the Spirit of God. They rise; we release. Bit by bit, the blocks are cleared away.

I have a simple method I use for dealing with inner blocks. It's a three-step process:

1. First, I locate an inner block—any distressing thought or feeling.

2. Next, I offer that block to the Divine Inner Healer to be removed.

3. Finally, having cleared an opening, I hold my heart open to the flow of Love, peace, and wisdom. Experiencing this flow is the goal of this process.

A Course in Miracles encourages us to bring our blocks "to the light." In the presence of light, darkness vanishes. Similarly, in the presence of God's Love, our resentments and self-attacks fade away. They are outshone by the experience of Divine Love. Our job is to walk our shadows into the light, and rejoice in our newfound vision and warmth.

In daily life, when an inner block "comes up," we've automatically completed step one. The block has surfaced. It's on our plate. We can either ignore it, or bring it to God to be healed. We have before us a great opportunity. Although it may be an uncomfortable moment, it can also be a transformative one. If we offer it to God, we open to healing and growth in Love.

Yesterday, I had a typical experience that illustrates this process. I became inundated by a series of business concerns. As I rushed around trying to handle everything, I found myself becoming increasingly agitated. Finally, at the height of my discomfort, I accidentally hit my toe against a sharp corner of my desk. At that point, I had to chuckle a bit, realizing where my agitated thoughts had led me. I stopped and began the three-step process.

I stepped back and took a quick inventory of my feelings and thoughts. "I'm feeling anxious," I said to myself. "I believe that I'm under a lot of pressure. I'm worried that people will get angry with me if I don't deal with these business issues in a timely manner." That "inventory" of my thoughts and feelings completed step one.

Then I moved on to step two. I took ownership of those thoughts and feelings, and brought them to the Spirit of God, the Inner Healer. "God," I said, "I bring these thoughts and feelings to you. Please replace them with something more peaceful and loving." I spent some time envisioning myself handing my thoughts to the Inner Healer, and feeling an increased sense of freedom.

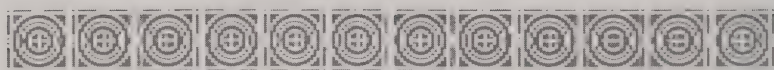
Then I moved on to step three. I sat for a minute with an open mind and heart, receiving a sense of peace. I allowed the feelings of peace to flow into and through me. As I did that, I realized that the business issues could wait until tomorrow, at which time I could manage them in a clearer and more reasonable way.

The block—in my case, the view of being pressured—came up for healing. With God's help, I was able to exchange it for a greater sense of peace and clarity.



Louise Hutner, Grounds for Sculpture

BOOK REVIEWS



Please enjoy these publishers' reviews of books that have recently come across our desk.

***God Has No Religion:
Blending Traditions for Prayer***

by Frances Sheridan Goulart

Sorin Books, April 2005

www.sorinbooks.com, 800-282-5681

"Real prayer penetrates to the marrow of our soul and leaves nothing untouched. The prayer of the heart is prayer that does not allow us to limit our relationship with God to interesting words or pious emotion. . . the prayer of the heart is the prayer of truth." ~ Henri J.M. Nouwen

Half of all Americans under thirty think the best religion is one that borrows from all religions. This remarkable collection of prayers will help them do just that. Drawn from such diverse sources as Mother Teresa, The Holy Qur'an, Gandhi, and Native American traditions, each prayer was chosen for its depth and practicality.

In this multi-traditional prayer book, each prayer's tradition and origin is highlighted, as well as options on how to tailor it to your own personal preferences. For example, closings to prayers may be added from other traditions and gender specific prayers may be changed as desired. Suggestions are also made for integrating the prayer into everyday life.

“Like viewing a world without borders, *God Has No Religion* creates a beautiful tapestry of unity in diversity. The suggested options for each prayer can lead the prayer to new experiences of the sacred and may even evoke inspiration for action,” said Nan Merrill, author of *Psalms for Praying*.

Frances Sheridan Goulart is a part-time yoga coach and Pilates instructor. She writes a bi-monthly column for *Kerux*, the newsletter of Pax Christi Metro New York and her articles have appeared in *Fellowship in Prayer* (now *SACRED JOURNEY*), *Focus on the Family*, and *Breakaway*. Goulart graduated from Hunter College in New York City and now lives in Connecticut.

Embracing the Mystery: The Sacred Unfolding in Ordinary People and Everyday Lives

by Meredith Jordan

Rogers McKay Publishing, 2004

www.rogersmckay.org, 207-283-0752

How might life be different if we truly believed that the holy heart is alive and at work in everything that's happening in our world? If, in one extravagant human experiment, we embodied the belief that the Mystery we call God is not located outside us waiting to be called in, but is inside us, waiting to be called out?

Embracing the Mystery is a collection of spiritually probing and inspiring stories, concluding with questions and meditations to help spiritual seekers unearth and embody our true nature. These stories of ordinary people encountering the Sacred in their everyday lives range from delightful to challenging, and point to those numinous moments, often unnoticed in

our busy forgetfulness, that awaken us to the extraordinary mystery of which we are a part.

Jordan says, "I wrote this book to inspire and encourage people of all faith traditions to just look at what's in front of them, to see that the Indwelling Mystery we call God is always revealing something new for us to learn, to expand our hearts, to grow in spiritual awareness. When we hold the attitude of standing still or being awake, call it whatever works for you, we offer the gift of our full presence to these encounters. We become what I like to call 'extravagantly available' to be touched and changed by events that could easily pass us by, unnoticed, in the frenetic activities of our daily lives."

Meredith Jordan, MA, is a psychotherapist and spiritual director. For more than twenty-five years, she has worked with adults and children embarking upon a spiritual journey to develop or deepen a personal relationship with the Mystery many people call God. She co-founded *Rogers McKay*, a multifaith educational organization that provides programming for seekers who want to create a sustainable spiritual life by listening for the presence of the Sacred in their everyday lives. She lives in southern Maine where she has a private counseling practice.

Change Your Mind and Your Life Will Follow:

12 Simple Principles

by Karen Casey

Conari Press, May 2005

www.redwheelweiser.com, 800-423-7087

"I remember hearing, early in my spiritual recovery, that we should thank God for every experience we have, while we

are having it; that we need to look for the good in every one of our experiences. I was not easily convinced. I had had too many painful times in my life to believe it was all intentional and all holy. It took more than a little willingness for me to review my past with an eye toward seeing and then accepting that all of my experiences were holy, even the most painful, and that all were necessary to help create who I had become, and thus had been a blessing." ~ Karen Casey

Thirty years ago best selling author Karen Casey wandered into a Twelve Step support group and learned there was only one thing she could change – herself. She found a group of people who had adopted this concept while sitting in a circle laughing—and she joined them. The result? Change so profound that Casey has dedicated much of her life to teaching others about it.

Change Your Mind and Your Life Will Follow offers a dozen simple principles to live by, including “Stop Focusing On the Problems So Their Solutions Can Emerge,” “Give Up Your Judgments,” and “Remember That You Are Not in Control.” Each principle makes up a chapter, and each chapter includes essays to help readers access peaceful, life-changing responses to just about any situation.

Karen Casey is the author of 16 books, including *Each Day a New Beginning: Daily Meditations for Women*, and she is a sought-after speaker at recovery and spirituality conferences throughout the country. Visit her online at www.womens-spirituality.com.

ENDPIECE



Popcorn Trees

Susan Gregg-Schroeder

A friend of mine was sitting on the ocean cliffs one day and sharing a bag of popcorn with her friend. As the two sat talking, my friend picked up some nearby twigs and began to put the plump pieces of popcorn on the ends of the twigs. Soon there was a forest of little popcorn trees on the ground in front of them.

Noticing the many birds nearby, they decided to move back from the popcorn forest and let the birds come and feast on the little trees. And so they moved further up the cliffs, and the birds came.

But much to their amazement, the birds, with beaks to the ground, rummaged around for the small bits of popcorn that had broken off as the larger kernels were placed on the twigs. The birds never looked up at the forest of popcorn within easy reach, right above their heads. They missed the feast that had been so carefully made available to them.

How often do we, in our blindness, our ignorance, or our need for control, fail to see the feast of opportunities made available to us? How often do we overlook the bread continually offered to us for the journey?

Susan Gregg-Schroeder is Coordinator of Mental Health Ministries for the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church, and author of In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression. Please visit her online at www.mentalhealthministries.net.

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